

The greatest freedom is ours

The soul and the harp/11 - The double beauty of God's masterpieces: the laws of creation and for man

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"Who knows if the desert that we will leave one day will not have this voice, this infinitely repeated human lament of the wind: mah-'enòsh? What is man? What was man? What was it like being a man?"

Guido Ceronetti, The book of psalms (Il libro dei salmi)

Psalm 19 starts from the firmament, proclaimer of divine glory, and ends with unconsciously caused faults, to tell us that a healed relationship has the same value of an entire galaxy.

«The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world» (Psalm 19,1-4). *The heavens declare*. The Bible is all words, it is all narration; it is the custodian of the word of God spoken through human words. It is the jealous sentinel of extraordinary and different stories, where words have been able to speak the unspeakable, making us dream of God until we are almost able to see him.

The Bible always loved and revered the word, to the point of risking turning it into an idol, violating the prohibition of image and idolatry contained in its own pages. One of the theological and poetic devices that has allowed it to avoid becoming the greatest and perfect idol, is the presence of the non-verbal languages of God in it. In fact, the skies, the firmament, the sun, the night also speak of the glory of Elohim. We humans are not the only ones speaking of God. We are not the only custodians and transmitters of his divine messages. The Bible tells us that there are wonderful tales of God written without the use of human words. God speaks to us through the mouths and with the words of the prophets, he wrote us love letters through the pens of the sacred writers, he composed beautiful songs through the poetry and lyre of David. However, the Bible knows that human language is not the only language used in our talks with Elohim - "*They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them*". Narratives more ancient than any human ones, which resounded through the universe long before the arrival of man, and which continue to resonate throughout infinite galaxies today; to tell us that those narratives are also, but not only, meant for us: we are not the only reason for creation. The stars do not write their tales just for us. This is where the humility and greatness of Adam meet and harmonize.

However, when the Bible testifies to the narrations of the stars and recognizes them as the language of God, even that non-verbal language becomes the word of man narrating the non-word of God. And so the Psalm becomes *an encounter of narratives*: the heavens narrate the glory to man without using human words, and while narrating these non-verbal narratives, the human words transform that which is not verbal into words. Marvellous. Hence, when we read its wildest words - "the word became flesh" - we must also include the non-words of the sun, the stars, and the cosmos in those words - the verb in the Bible is constituted by all the words of the earth and all the "words" of heaven.

Perhaps the first tales written by men were attempts to narrate the tales of nature written without words. As a child learns to speak by repeating his or her mother's words, we learned to speak by repeating the "words" of the tales of the stars. Many ancient peoples were so fascinated by this cosmic language that they called the sun and the stars *gods*. The Bible, on the other hand, places its God even above the highest stars. The stars are not God, but His creations - *the heavens declare the glory of God*. They are not bearers of their own message, but signifiers of other meanings, that are pronounced "words" as well. Herein lies the difference between this Psalm and the cosmic songs that we find in Babylonian or Egyptian literature. The sun is not God, but a guest of God: «In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course» (Psalm 19,4-5). It is his best athlete, running every day from east to west, encountering the night in order to pass on his message, to tell it theophoric words every morning: «It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other» (Psalm 19,6). The whole Bible can be found within *the Canticle of the Sun*.

No sooner have we caught our breaths from this cosmic vision of the verb, spoken through a poem captured here in one of its spring moments at the dawn of civilization, than the Psalm surprises us yet again with a second twist: «The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul» (Psalm 19,7). Where does this leap from the cosmic symphony to the Torah, from heaven to the Law come from? A leap so unexpected that a fair number of exegetes have speculated that the psalms at the origin of Psalm 19 were actually (at least) two, subsequently merged together by a final editor.

In truth, the Bible itself reveals the unity of the Psalm to us. In the eyes of biblical man, both the firmament and the Torah are masterpieces of YHWH. When that ancient psalmist raised his eyes to the sky, he was enthralled by the harmony and beauty of it; but then he felt the exact same charm when he looked down at the earth and found the Torah there. Cosmic order is guaranteed by the intrinsic laws impressed by the Creator in his creation, and moral order arises from obeying the laws and precepts of the Torah. They have the same purpose, the same providence: «The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart;... They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb» (Psalm 19,8-10). The psalmist felt the same "joy to the heart" when he saw the sun rise every dawn as when he read "honour your father and your mother"; he was equally stunned by the firmament and by the "you shall not murder". Because he knew that the stars and the Torah were gifts meant for him, nothing but mere and complete *gratuity*. Without this double beauty we cannot enter biblical humanism, we cannot understand its greatest reward: «In keeping them there is great reward» (Psalm 19,11). «*The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*» only with Psalm 19 in front of your eyes can you grasp the meaning of the last page of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, one of the most biblical pages in all philosophy.

That ancient poet knew another thing as well: «But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me» (Psalm 19,12-13). Above the sun, the stars, docile and meek, obey the laws that YHWH has written for them; transmitting their message, they do not transgress, and they do not sin. Not under the sun, because on earth Adam was created with a unique moral freedom making him the great mystery of the universe. Only men and women can decide not to follow the laws of love designed for them by God. In this, they are superior to both the sun and the stars. Herein lies the great mystery of the biblical man: the image of God makes him free to the point of being able to deny the very laws designed to bring him happiness (our most important sources of unhappiness are those that we choose knowing that they in fact bring unhappiness). We are freer than the sun, and therefore less obedient. And our great and wonderful destiny contained in Psalm 8 returns: «What is mankind? And yet...».

Among all human sins, the ones underlined here are those made inadvertently and unconsciously. Although the twentieth century showed us that our unconscious is not truly innocent, the category of unconsciously committed sins is far from our modern sensibilities, heavily centred on our *intentions*. The Bible is not a set of ethics, although there are many ethic principles present in its books. Biblical humanism cannot be framed within the realms of any modern ethical theory (responsibility, intentions, virtues ...), but it is certainly more interested than we are in the *consequences* of all acts. Because what interested it the most was the balance between the social body and caring for the Covenant with God. Hence, if someone committed a sin causing damage, the Bible looked above all at the resulting imbalance in social relations. The Decalogue begins with the remembrance of the liberation from Egypt: not with an abstract ethical principle, but with a *fact*. The historical dimension of biblical faith is also

manifested in the great value it attributes to behaviors, actions, deeds, and words. Just think, for example, of old man Isaac who by mistake / deception ends up giving his blessing to Jacob; but when he realizes his mistake he can no longer revoke the erroneous blessing, because those words had already *generated* a reality as they were being spoken, operating independently of the subjective conditions of Isaac and his relatives (Genesis 27). Sins are facts that act and change the world, with a life of their own separate from the intentions that generated them in the first place. If I say a bad word to you today and apologize to you tomorrow, that excuse can have an effect on the future, but it cannot erase the reality and pain that that word already generated in the heart of the other person during the hours that passed between the sin and repentance. And in the Bible words are such a serious matter, that they produce effects all on their own, even when we are unaware of it, even during those "hours" that pass without an apology from us, because we are unaware of the damage we are causing – unconsciously caused damage can be greater precisely because repentance and proper excuses never come.

Hence, asking God (and the community) to be absolved for unconsciously committed sins arose from the awareness that the damage we cause is greater than our bad intentions. Biblical man knew this, and worked to restore the balance. We have however lost consciousness of this, and do not ask for forgiveness from anyone, but hide behind our good faith, thereby increasing the imbalances.

Psalm 15 praised sincerity. Psalm 19 tells us that sometimes sincerity is not enough. Because life includes the value of the consequences of our wrongful actions carried out in good faith as well. The Bible is a continuous and valuable exercise in self-subversion, which is the most effective cure against any ideology. Including the many smaller ideologies of our century born upon the death of the great ideologies of the last century.

Psalm 19 swept us away to heaven number seven to then bring us right back to earth, to our inadvertent and unconscious faults, to tell us something important that we should no longer forget: a healed relationship is worth as much as an entire galaxy.